CAUTION
Humbly Offer'd
ABOUT
Passing the Bill against *Blasphemy*.

THE *Caution* requisite in the Consideration of the Bill against *Blasphemy*, is this, that the Word may be so well Distinguish'd and Explained, that it may not prove, in Practice, a greater *Snare* and *Suffering* to Good Men, than a Restraint upon Ill Ones. For if it be left *Ambiguous*, so that it may Affect *Religious*, as well as Lewd and Wicked People, it will, like the *Trojan Horse*, carry an Army in the Belly of it, to serve the Spleen or Pride of every Party, in their turn of Government, to Oppress the Rest.

Charity forbids me to think the Gentlemen, whose Zeal is Imploy'd to Promote the Success of this Bill, have any such unfair Latitudes in their Design; and therefore I shall First say, *What* Blasphemy *is in it self*. Secondly, *How* Blasphemy *is Cognoscible to the Civil Authority*, and how far It may fall within Its Province to Consider and Suppress.

Blasphemy, then, in it self, is certainly, *a Speaking Evilly of God*: But what that Evil Speaking is, and how to Distinguish and Explain it, to the Magistrates Purpose, will be the Narrow and Pinch of the Question.

Bill read 7 March 1698

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I Grant, a Man that ſhall Seriouſly Profeſs ſome Erroneous Opinion concerning God, upon a weak Judgment, or a miſtaken Education, that Contradicts the Expreſs Text of Holy Scripture, may be ſaid to hold a *Blaſphemous* Opinion, juſt as ſuch may be ſaid to take God's Name in vain, that Pray to Him, and yet *hate to be Reformed* by Him: And as God Charges *Blaſphemy* on them *that ſay they are Jews, and are not, but of the Synagogue of Satan:* Which, whether it was Error or Hypocriſie, It does not appear to be of ſuch a Nature as is Puniſhable by the Civil Magiſtrate. I therefore Diſtinguiſh and Say, That *Blaſphemy*, as it falls under the Notice of Civil Power, is not an Humble and Serious Miſtake of the *Text*, but a *Preſumptuous and Deſpiteful Expreſſion*, or *Opinion about the Nature and Being of God: An Irreligious and Scornful Treating of the Divine Majeſty in his Nature and Attributes*; and not an Incongruous Speculation, or Erroneous Notion from an Unſound Judgment, or a Miſguided Conſcience. For what is true of an *Heretick*, and is his *Characteriſtick*, is alſo true of a *Blaſphemer*; that is, not a Miſtaken, but a Guilty Man: Not a Conſcientious, but an *Irreligious* Perſon: One that is *Condemned in himſelf*, who *Dares* the Divinity, and Proudly Acts againſt Knowledge, and ſo, Conſcious to himſelf of his own Evil and Error.

Thus the Apoſtle to *Titus*; *A Man that is an* Heretick, *after the firſt and ſecond Admonition*, Reject; *Knowing that he that is ſuch*, is *Subverted and Sinneth, being Condemned of himſelf*. And ſuch a Self-condemned Sinner is the Blaſphemer proper for the Magiſtrates Cognizance.

Not Conſidering well of this one word *Heretick*, in the Apoſtles ſence, *viz.* One *Self-Condemned, or Condemned of Himſelf*, has fill'd the World with *Blood* and *Miſery* through many Generations. Whereas had St. *Paul*'s Definition and Direction been underſtood and follow'd, Miſtaken Men had been Pitied and Informed, and not Perſecuted and Killed for *Gods ſake*; while the Impious Contemners and Blaſphe-

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mers of God and Religion had met with their Deserts from the Civil Magistrates.

But I will readily confess, that a Person never so Serious in his Mistake concerning God, may very well be Disowned by the Church he is a Member of, because the contrary Sentiment might be one of the Terms of Communion, and no Wrong done; But Therefore, to say, **Take him Goaler**, though otherwise a Vertuous, Peaceable and Charitable Man, is a Method, not to be Justified by True Christianity; especially when that which is required to be Believed, is the **Comment**, and not the *Text*, which alone should be *Sacred* and *Controuling* in point of Doctrine among Christians. And to say True, 'twould be too hard a Task, to defend the *Imposition* of a Doctrine, not delivered in the Terms of Scripture, which is the Great *Creed* of Christians, when the Party to Believe does not refuse to give his Faith in the Terms thereof: For after all, Truth loses no Ground by fair Concessions, and I know not how we can well deny that *Comments* are a sort of Begging of the Question, which have not a Voice from Heaven to Confirm them.

I perceive the Bill is Fram'd in favour of the *Christian Religion*, and of the *Trinity*, as a main Pillar of it. But after all, I believe our *Good Lives* will best Recommend and Maintain It. *Framing* of *Creeds* hath cost former Ages so very Dear, by the Distraction of Churches, and the Destruction of People, that it were great pitty fresh occasions should be given to Revive a Controversie so well laid.

This Quarrel alone, had so besmeared the Face of Christianity with Blood, in the first Ages of the Church, that it lost to Christians that Reverence with the *Gentiles*, their Piety and Charity had before rais'd to themselves, and their Profession: And whatever we may think, nothing else can *Repair our Breaches, and Restore to us Paths to Dwell in.*

There are ſeveral ſorts of Creeds, I know, as the Athanaſian, Nicean, Sabellian, and in ſhort the Real and Nominal Trinitarians. But ſince none can be ſo orthodox as that deliver'd to us in *Gods Book*, why ſhould we preſs the point further? Who can Determine with equal Authority to that of the *Holy Ghoſt*? Who can expreſs His mind After? Or how can we frame a better *General* to Center In? At leaſt to maintain Charity by, If our ſentiments of the Intention of the Text are not the ſame? I ſpeak this with great reſpect to the ſecular Authority. For it is certain, that the ſeveral Churches, or Religious Societies that may hold theſe ſeveral Modes of Trinity, have that Power over their own Members, by the Common Rules of Fellowſhip, that as to ſuch Points as are the Terms of Communion, They may Reſpectively deal with any of them that may forſake their uſual Belief; ſo far as refuſing them any further Communion. But for the Civil Authority, *at this time of Day*, to Interpoſe, and *Penally* Impoſe any one of them, unleſs it were the ſacred Text (to which all Parties Refer and Submit) looks ſomething hard: And when we conſider the *Divided* State of the Nation, the *Learning* and *Freedom* of Spirit that is now among the *People*, and the *Liberty of Conſcience* they are in the Poſſeſſion of, I muſt acknowledge, I cannot ſee the Prudence of it. But to make Property a Sacrifice for miſtakes about Religion, if yet it be a miſtake; and to make it So by the vote of Civil Authority, that indeed may Conclude but not Convince, (for that pretends not to an Infallible Spirit of Deciſion, as to Truth and Error) has certainly a Difficulty in it not eaſily overcome: Since to me it ſeems to ſhake thoſe Fundamental Laws by which Property is Declared and Defended. For it is hard to apprehend how Faith is the Foundation of Property.

Nor is this all; for if this Bill Paſs, to pick a hole in the Coat of any one Party this time, the reſt may ſay, that perhaps lye open to be hitt upon other Points, what know

we but that it will *be our Turn* next time; and tho' as to this Doctrine we are within the Pale and Safe, yet upon other Articles we may at another time be equally expoſed; and ſo that which cannot be done at once, may, in the ſame manner, by little and little, be accompliſhed at laſt, to the Prejudice of every Intereſt that Diſſents from that which is uppermoſt? I mean, a forced Uniformity in Worſhip, Doctrine and Diſcipline. Certainly Preſidents in ſo Nice a Caſe muſt be very dangerous, and every Party being concern'd in every Party's Security, it is obliged, by its own ſafety, to endeavour the ſafety of the Reſt, tho', as to the Point on Foot, They Differ'd as much from the Party in Queſtion, as that which holds the Chair.

I confeſs this Conſideration moves much with me; and if their be any ground for it, then certainly there can be no Good One now, for a Bill againſt *Blaſphemy*, without great Caution and Diſtinction in the wording of it; leſt Virtue ſuffer more than Vice, and Diſſent rather than Impiety.

I have been the Freer in this matter, being neither *Deiſt* nor *Socinian*; and have no other Exception to the Bill, than that which I have Expreſt: For I fear it will be an Occaſion of Animoſity, if not of *Perſecution*: And as it has more than once happened, that part which Affects the *Conſcientious* ſhall be more Vigorouſly Executed, than that which Regards the Irreligious Blaſphemer. For it has been Obſerved, during the Reign of *King Charles* the Second, that the Diſſenters Suffered more in *One Year* that the Laws were put in Execution, for their Religious Meetings, than the *Impious* and *Debauched* did in his *Whole Reign*: So much more Inclinable were ſome Men to *Wink* at *Wickedneſs* than Indure a Conſcientious Diſſent: Of which the *Eccleſiaſtical Courts* were but too great an Inſtance, as well as the Ordinary Seſſions of Juſtice

To Conclude, but with all Submiſſion and Reſpect to Authority, I ſay again, to make a *Culpable* and *Puniſhable* Blaſphemy, there muſt be an *Irreligious* and *Deſpiteful* Intention and Deſign in the words of the Perſon Accuſed.

And here I conceive the Civil Magiſtrate has the full and free uſe and exerciſe of his Authority againſt Blaſphemy: For Blaſphemy, in this Sence, *Corrupts Good Manners*, being a plain and Impudent Indignity and Affront upon the moſt High Good and God; and merits not only Law, but the warmeſt Zeal to ſuppreſs It: For to endure it, as it hath been, God knows, too long and too much already, is the high way to Provoke God to *vindicate* his own Glory and Soveraignity at the coſt of the whole Nation; wherein the Innocent may happen to ſuffer with the Guilty, tho' to theſe a *Judgment*, and to them but an Affliction.

It is to be Lamented, as well as abom'd, that a People of ſo much Light and Knowledge, and under ſuch pretences to *Reformation*, ſhould want Zeal to ther Power, to Root out ſuch Scandalous and Impious Practices from among us. There are good Laws, if they were but Imployed to diſcourage ſuch Irreligious Perſons, let their Quality be what it will. Law knows *No Reſpect of Perſons*, Tho' it too often happens that many Cloathed with Authority Do, that have the Power and are ſworn to Suppreſs them.

And indeed, as the caſe ſtands, If we are in earneſt to ſuppreſs *Blaſphemy*, *Prophaneſs* and *Debauchery*, There ſeems to be but two ways in the Power of the Civil Magiſtrates; but they are good ones, and might be in great meaſure effectual.

Firſt, to ſuppreſs all *Play-Houſes*, and *Gameing-Houſes*, and Places of *Looſeneſs* and *Debauchery*, thoſe Seminaries or Nurſeries of Impiety: That have palpably *Relax'd* the Ancient Diſcipline of the Nation, and corrupted the Youth of it, to the Ruin of the *Honour*, *Virtue* and *Fortune*, of many Ancient and Worthy Families: And which therefore are the *Scandal* and *Averſion* of the Sober Men of every Perſwaſion.

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The next way to Extinguiſh Vice, is to make a Vicious Man *Uncapable* of being a *Magiſtrate*; who, being conſcious of his own Ills, will but *faintly* Puniſh other Men's, and whoſe Power will *Awe* others from Informing againſt him. If Publick Employments and Marks of Favour were made the *Rewards* of *Virtue* and *Ability*, where-ever they are found, we ſhould quickly ſee an Alteration among the Gentry of *England*, and by their Power and Example, a Reformation among the Common People. And to ſay true, If *Virtue*, and not *Opinion*, were the *Teſt*, *England* would have the Uſe and Service of the Sobriety and Good Sence of all Her People, *for the Suppreſſion of Vice*, and *Introducing of a General Reformation of Manners*: Which God Almighty ſend.

THE END.